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## **The Application of John Dewey's Ethical Thinking to Classrooms & Schools**

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## Abstract

The authors' discussion of Dewey's ethical theory demonstrates the relevance of his thinking for both educators and students. They analyze his views using four overlapping themes—Contextual Circumstances, Unique Participants, Informational Sources and Analytic Tools—to frame approximately a dozen subtopics that deepen an understanding of his views: specific environments, particular situations, ideological backgrounds, conceptual understandings, ethical frameworks, specific intentions, instant impressions, experiential learning, empirical research, public ideals, hypothetical testing of options, ethical principles, personal and social elements of decisions and ecological implications of ethical judgments. To ensure that the applicability of Dewey's ideas for educators and students is obvious, forms of the question What does this thought mean for educators and students? are regularly raised and answered.

## Introduction

As we examine Dewey's ethical<sup>1</sup> thought and its usefulness for educators and students, we also note some common misunderstandings of his views. We embed these misinterpretations in our discussion of the four themes we use to frame his ideas and the subtopics we employ to clarify them. Our four themes are Contextual Circumstances, Unique Participants, Informational Sources and Analytical Tools. Within these four themes, we discuss the importance of approximately a dozen topics that help explicate his theory. These topics and their relationship to the four themes are as follows: (a) Contextual Circumstances: the specific environment of choices, the particular situation of actions; (b) Diverse Participants: the ideological backgrounds of participants, the conceptual understanding of participants, the ethical frameworks of participants, the specific intentions of participants; (c) Informational Sources: the instant impressions of participants, the experiential learning of participants, the empirical contributions of research, the public ideals of a society, the hypothetical testing of options; and (d) Analytical Tools: the utilization of ethical principles, the personal and social elements in decisions and the ecological implications of ethical judgments. Since Dewey's ethical thinking is a manifestation of his general view of reflective thinking, the themes and subtopics we describe are in fact elaborations on his approach to reflective thinking.

To set the stage for examining Dewey's idea of ethical thinking, a cursory explanation of his conception of reflective thinking is in order. In *How We Think*, he claims that reflective

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<sup>1</sup>Dewey sometimes wishes to avoid the use of the terms *ethical* and *moral* because he thinks that the terms themselves often interfere with discussing the very ideas he wants to pursue (EW 4:54-61). Obviously, he could not in reality avoid them on many if not most occasions. Much of the time he uses the terms *moral* and *ethical* as synonyms.

thinking—the type that can occur in all aspects of our lives, personal, social and professional—is “the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving serious and consecutive consideration” to it (LW 8:113).<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, he adds that reflective thought consists of “[a]ctive, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (LW 8:118). Likewise, he asserts that reflective thinking involves a number of nonlinear steps or phases, such as seeing or identifying a problem, impulse, or perplexity (MW 9:163), examining relevant conditions and environments to collect and analyze data, developing potential suggestions for addressing the problem or doubt, testing hypotheses imaginatively to ascertain their viability, revising and expanding our original interpretation of the situation and using the knowledge gained to resolve the doubt or solve, if possible, the problem (LW 8:113, 180, 304). Thus, the process of “turning a subject over in the mind and giving [it] serious and consecutive consideration” (LW 8:113) has both a purpose and a process (LW 8:113).

### Themes and Topics

#### The Contextual Circumstances

*The specific environment of participants’ choices.*

*The particular situation of participants’ actions.*

#### The Unique Participants

*The ideological backgrounds of participants.*

*The conceptual understanding of participants.*

*The ethical frameworks of participants.*

*The specific intentions of participants.*

#### The Informational Sources

*The immediate impressions of participants.*

*The experiential learning of participants.*

*The empirical contributions of research.*

*The public ideals of society.*

*The hypothetical testing of decisions.*

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<sup>2</sup> The Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale citation system is used throughout this study. Thus, (LW 8:113) is a reference to *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953* and specifically to volume 8 page 113 in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. Our debt to and appreciation for the numerous contributions of the late Jo Ann Boydston and Larry A. Hickman to Dewey studies is immense.

## The Analytical Tools

*The utilization of ethical principles.*

*The personal and social elements in decisions.*

*The ecological implications of ethical judgments.*

## Conclusion

In closing, a few suggestions may be helpful as we turn over in our minds a few practical matters Dewey emphasizes. First, Dewey encourages us to avoid being narrowly interested in the negative side of ethics, e.g., being moralistic, pessimistic and judgmental (LW 7:207). This mindset is for many at least, off-putting. In addition, the mindset may imply that moral condemnation is more important to us than is ethical development. Likewise, seeking or imposing judgments unilaterally is contrary to the iterative, reflective process of probing issues by inserting relevant factors and reaching real complexity. To emphasize this notion, he asserts that we should focus on the potentiality of a person for good and her capacity to grow ethically rather than concentrate on her immediate undesirable actions. Looking at the situation in this manner, he recommends, each person should be “humane in judging others” and, if appropriate, “severe in judging him[or her]self” (LW 7:348; MW 12:181). Briefly stated, we need to be conscientious without being overly conscientious and morose (LW 7:258, 272).

A side note to being sensitive and generous in discussions with colleagues and students is worth our attention. When interacting with people in general, Dewey’s view of expressing culturally appropriate manners of *greetings, respect, politeness, mutual accommodation* and *adaptation* (LW 13:37-38)—which he labels “minor morals” (MW 9: 22)—is valuable. While acknowledging that these qualities may be artificial if not oppressive at times, he thinks they are usually “the oil which prevents or reduces friction” in human relationships (LW 13:37). Avoiding and reducing conflict during ethical discussions may be nearly a prerequisite in school settings, especially when handling concerns with students and their families. Perhaps, too, we may see room for applying an idea that Dewey claims is an indispensable part of democracy—“asking others what they would like, what they need, what their ideas are” (LW 15:283)—as we seek to deepen their commitment to the democratic ideals they may have disregarded.

On the other hand, if we are tempted to avoid ethical deliberations, situations and responsibilities because we fear being accused of or attacked for having inconsistent or hypocritical behavior, we should set aside our fears and accept our responsibilities as educators to nurture ethical development (LW 13:11-38). In addition, each of us has a “speckled” character that can be readily admitted (MW 14:36). Consequently, each of us needs the courage to “acknowledge the unpleasant consequences of [our]...past and present acts” (MW 12:139). If

not, we may allow time to remold our mental ethical history until our memory believes we do not have any flaws (MW 12:139). Revising history in this fashion is neither helpful to ourselves nor to our colleagues and students.

Dewey may also obliquely offer suggestions to those of us who are cynics, skeptics, and rebels when it comes to the very idea of ethics and teaching. Our experiences may have influenced us to reject the entire realm of ethics because we have studied or taught with people who imposed their private values on us. We may have listened to a plethora of pros and cons about ethical theory and behavior such that we have become jaded, distrustful or skeptical about any ethical agreement (LW 7:170). And we may be exasperated because people ignore our legitimate observations. We may simply prefer to get away from the competitive clamor of debates where some folks seem more interested in winning an argument than in finding a way to help others experientially.

So, what might Dewey say to us as educators? Perhaps he might say we should start with our ordinary experiences in and outside of school and not with arguments about ethics. Do our experiences teach us anything that clarifies ideas that are ethically meaningful to us? Does the fact that we reject an imposition of values suggest anything? Perhaps, it means we have a desire for legitimate freedom. Maybe it implies a desire to be respected as a person. If so, does the rejection of imposition clarify our buried values? Or, perhaps, we have seen or experienced some form of discrimination or bigotry. We resent it. We complain about it. We identify the acts and attitudes that led to our feelings and reactions. What does our experience teach us this time? Does it point to a string of ideas and acts that Dewey himself recommends: that we identify the problems that trouble us, collect information about these problems, develop rationales to explain our reasons for thinking that the predicaments were created by unwise practices and policies, rehearse a set of plans to determine how best to deal with the problems and revise our best plan before we act to promote what we think is fair and considerate practice? Maybe other ideas come to mind. Whatever our experience, Dewey is convinced we have a lot to learn about ethics from our ordinary experience even if we look at issues as practical problems that need to be addressed (EW 4: 54-61).

Where do we go from here, assuming that we are in a slightly different location from our starting place? Have we developed cynical and skeptical attitudes, dispositions and habits that have surprisingly paralyzed us as we have attempted to protect ourselves from further disappointments? Do we continue to believe that *no one* will support change in a school that leads to a practice of democratic values? Or do we believe that no one will support mutual respect among educators and students, freedom for pedagogical innovation and fairness in professional matters? If that is our situation, Dewey might suggest that we reconstruct our beliefs, dispositions and habits so that we *act* in the best interest of everyone in schools. He might also encourage us to recognize that we may have allowed *a particular experience* to lead

us to become cynical and skeptical about every experience thereafter and that our skepticism has become *universalized* and even *absolutized* in our thinking. Dewey may recommend that we break our bad or absolutist thinking habit and that we rebel against our own fatalistic behavioral patterns.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that using the multiple factors we have identified and employing Dewey's interactive investigative cycle does not always lead to quick and tidy solutions (LW 7:164-166). Admittedly, some ethical decisions are very easy; others are somewhat difficult to reach because they are not clearly irreconcilable with democratic ethical principles, do not contravene carefully scrutinized societal laws and do not defy clear and well-understood contractual duties. Still other decisions are extremely perplexing. Even so, the conclusions we reach regarding these easy to difficult to perplexing decisions demand our full attention and inquiry. A thorough inquiry is especially crucial to Dewey's ethical process with very perplexing situations although we are led to greater ambiguity on occasions rather than to obvious conclusions. One challenging feature of his framework is that the meticulousness explicit in utilizing all the factors necessary in ethical analysis and the likelihood that the more factors we enter into the "turning over" process, the more democratic the procedure may become even as the possibility of an indisputable resolution may be less likely for any party. Disputable conclusions may be the best and the only ones we can achieve at times although we seek to remove as much doubt as is possible before reaching a final decision. But whether these kinds of decisions are indisputable or disputable, the nature of the factors themselves and the gathering of relevant information about them makes the ethical process for resolving disputes or situations a form of social learning and decision making, i.e., discovering all the relevant aspects will entail drawing out all parties' contributions. Thus the complexity of the deliberative process honors the consequential nature of ethical development and democratic dispute resolution. Although democratic dispute resolution is time consuming it is a critical element in our schools if we want an open, deep and trustworthy democratic ecology and culture. Stealing Dewey's observation elsewhere, doing anything less would be "narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (MW 1:5).

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